

What Is Ecumenical”

Deuteronomy 6:4-5; John 17:11,20-23

In our explorations into our spiritual identity as a community of faith, we’ve looked at “What is Baptist?” and “What is Church?” Today we consider “What is Ecumenical?”

First, a field-report following last week’s sermon. I talked last week about how some people know exactly who’s in and who’s out of the church and noted the Alabama Baptists who a few years back reported the exact number of saved people in Alabama.

When voting last week Sue and I went to a Baptist church nearby. On the bulletin board was a prominent graph with the title *Lostness in North Carolina*. It color-coded the “Pockets of Lostness” in the state—lostness was determined by how few or how many members of evangelical churches were in the area. If you were dark Duke blue you were in a high-lostness pocket. If you were a pale blue, you were in a mostly “saved” pocket. On one such chart Statesville was dark purple! Not good.

There are all kinds of ways to be lost and saved. The problem is when we are sure who is who.

I

The word *ecumenical* does not roll easily off our tongues. We do not normally use the word, nor need we. But it captures an important part of who we are at Grace Baptist Church.

The word has great spiritual beauty to me. It comes from the New Testament Greek word *OIKOMENE* which means *the whole inhabited earth as the household of God*.

What if we lived that way, as if the whole world were the household of God? Animal, plant, mineral, the waters, the land and us late-comers, the human creatures, all members of the household of God? How would it shape the way we relate to others and to God's creation?

You see the New Testament Greek word on the bulletin cover, *OIKOMENE*, over the ship on the waters. It is the logo of the World Council of Churches, formed as part of the Ecumenical Movement which I will turn to later. The word is used in Matthew 24:14 as Jesus said, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, *ecumene*, as a testimony to the nations."

What can this word mean for us? I start here: *1) the unity of all Christians; 2) spiritual friendship with all religions; and 3) the care of Creation as part of the household of God*.

II

The great Hebrew *credo*, sung at every shabbat service goes:

Hear, O Israel!

The Lord is Our God!

The Lord is *One!*

There is a Oneness about God and an original oneness of the world. This is at the heart of Jewish faith and ours as well.

It gives me hope, this Oneness of God and oneness in God. If God is One perhaps I can be too, one in myself, one with others. If God is One perhaps the world can be one as well.

In his book *Judaism for the World*, Arthur Greene meditates on this oneness. I have arranged some of his words in a prose poem, "One."

I

There is only One.

II

That One dressed itself in this "coat of many colors" called the universe.

III

Shekinah, the indwelling, presence of Y-H-W-H

is to be found everywhere, in each place, moment and human soul.

IV

A religious person is one who seeks *shekinah*,
the Presence, or divine sparks within each moment and every deed
transforming them into occasions for worship
and restoring the fragmented universe to cosmic wholeness.

V

The One is manifest in every creature,
and “delights” equally in being present
within each form of existence that it enters.

VI

“In the beginning” is our way of saying
“There is a One that underlies the many.”

VII

We intuit the oneness of being. We are creatures of a natural world
that is itself a multi-colored garbing of divine glory.

VIII

The great secret: there is only one¹

The Jewish faith describes its calling in the world a *tikkun olam*, the “repair of the world.” We work with God to make the world *one* again.

The word *ecumenical* affirms the Oneness of God, the oneness of all reality and the sacredness of life itself.

III

So now a second theme. If the whole world is the household of God, then we are called to be stewards of that household, care-takers of earth, home economists in the Great Economy. (The phrase “home economics” comes from this word.)

The world is not given to us to exploit for our own purposes. We are called to be stewards of God’s household of the world, home-ecologists in the Great Ecology.

As the Psalmist wrote:

The earth is the Lord’s
and the fulness there of,
the world and those who dwell therein (Psalm 24:1).

In the vast household of God we are called to live as brothers and sisters to all people peoples of the earth, kin in the same household of God.

III

The third theme has to do with what is called “The Ecumenical Movement.” It began in Scotland over 100 years ago. It recognized the scandal of the badly divided church across the world and sought to unite Christians so that Christians might better represent the oneness of the Body of Christ.

In John 17 Jesus offers what is called the “high priestly prayer. In it he prayed

Holy Abba,
keep them in your name
which you have given me
that they may be one,
even as we are one.

It is a oneness as the waves that catch the sea. Jesus with God and we one with one another and God.

Jesus is still praying that prayer. There are over 45,000 Christian denominations in the world. It is important to say: oneness is not sameness, and that our multiplicity can be like God’s “coat of many colors.” But sometimes we have made enemies of one another.

There’s a story about a man going along a road and seeing another man on the edge of a cliff, about to jump off. He ran to the man to coax him back from the

ledge. He asked the man's name. "Joe", the man replied. Then he asked where he was from. "Nashville", the man said. "Nashville, that's my home town too!"

Where did you go to school? "Northside High." "I went to Northside high!"

"What church did you go to?"

"A Baptist church."

"I did too!"

"What kind of Baptist church?"

"A Southern Baptist Church."

"I did too!"

"What kind of Southern Baptist are you?"

"I'm a *One-Seed-In-The-Spirit* Baptist!"

"Heretic!", the man said, and pushed him off the cliff.

In 1948 the World Council of Churches was formed to help heal divisions and discover those places of unity among churches and Christians. Perhaps it's most powerful expression today is in local communities of churches which have formed to work together for the well-being of the community.

But now I move to a *deeper ecumenism*, a deeper form of spiritual unity: and that is friendship among religions. Hans Kung, a leading Catholic theologian said in the 1990's "The prerequisite of peace among the nations is peace among religions." It seems an even more urgent word today as politicized religions create more and more dangerous divisions.

So we move more beyond unity among all Churches to reconciled friendship with all religions, to the cultivation of inter-faith conversation and inter-faith friendship.

This has been a mark of Grace Baptist Church in our friendship with Congregation Emanuel and Masjid Al-Muminum here in Statesville, and with the annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Service we host.

Does such interfaith friendship water down our Christian commitment? Not for me. I like what Mother Teresa said once: "I love all religions; I am in love with my own."

V

Now lastly, to Grace Baptist and its ecumenical identity. We are a walking, talking ecumenical movement in and of ourselves!

Last time I counted we have counted among our congregation those who grew up,

Baptist

Pentecostal

Methodist

Lutheran

Episcopal

Presbyterian

Roman Catholic

Jewish

And Bahai

We may also have some of us who would find themselves in the “Spiritual But Not Religious” category.

Have I missed anyone? There is an inter-faith and ecumenical dimension to who we are. Our sign our front says:

Grace Baptist Church

A Welcoming and Affirming Place

And we are not fudging.

Our Covenant written 10 or so years ago made clear that there were no requirements as to one's form of religious beliefs in order to become a "Covenant Participant", our phrase for "Member". We are a sign of God's desire that we be *one*.

The story is told of a man who died and went to heaven and was being shown around by St. Peter.

St. Peter took him to the Catholic House and said, "That's where the Catholics live." He showed him to Presbyterian House and said, "That's where the Presbyterians live." He took him to the Jewish House and said, "That's where the Jews live." Then he led him to the Baptist House and said with a whisper: "That's where the Baptists live." The man asked "Why are you whispering?" Saint Peter said, "We must be quiet. They think they're the only ones here!"

Well that's been too much of our past. It need not be our future. From the year 1948 when the World Council of Churches was formed, the Southern Baptist Convention has refused to join. It's part of our human mania to be separate and superior.

So, here are some closing questions.

1) How are we at Grace ecumenical in spirit?

2) What language can we use to communicate who we are as an ecumenical community? As I said before, we need not use that word, but what word or words best describe that part of our spiritual identity?

3) Are there ways we can formalize our identity in any association with other broader Christian groups, as we have done with the Alliance of Baptists, the North American Baptist Peace Fellowship and Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists?

4) Can we authentically be Baptist Christians and Ecumenical all at the same time? Can we live with humble convictions and open hearts?

A lot of this has to do with the vastness of our God. Some of us read in the 1960s, a book titled, *Your God Is Too Small*, by J.B. Phillips. It began to expand our ideas about God. How small is our God, how large?

The poet Sydney Lanier wrote in a poem, “The Marshes of Glenn”:

As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery sod

Behold I will build me a nest on the greatness of God....

By so many roots as the marsh-grass sends in the sod

I will heartily lay me a-hold on the greatness of God.²

The ecumenical spirit is built on the greatness of God.

Amen.

1. Arthur Green, *Judaism For the World: Reflections on God, Life and Love*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020),3-22.
2. Sydney Lanier, “The Marshes of Glynn.”